

Freedom, Discipline, Desire
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Dedicated to my teacher Professor Richard Reinhold Niebuhr

This morning I want to explore with you two different definitions of freedom, which I have composed in order to contrast two different conceptions of freedom and their relation to discipline and desire.

1. Freedom is the power to choose whatever goods one wants.
2. Freedom is the power to want whatever is good.

The first definition is probably most familiar to those of us who are privileged North Americans. It is the definition that undergraduates can be relied on to offer. If I ask, what is freedom? they will tell me: Freedom means being able to do or think or say or be whatever you want. Freedom means the power to choose whatever goods—tangible or intangible-- seem good to you. The opposite of freedom is inhibition or prohibition or compulsion.

This first definition implies that the subject of freedom is someone who has ‘free choice’. And this someone selects among multiple goods on the basis of personal desire. If I ask my students, how does this ‘free chooser’ know what goods to want? They may sound a cautionary note: there are indeed forces of socialization, culture, parental expectations, peer pressure, advertising, which influence our wants and may in part determine our choices . It is not always clear whether we choose goods because we want them, or because we have been made to want them. Yet young people are usually confident that deep down, underlying their socially constructed desires, one can consult the authentic, spontaneous, personal desires that enable you to make free choices. So they will sustain the definition that freedom is the power to choose whatever goods one wants.

In relation to this definition, discipline does not strike them as appealing. If I ask students to describe how discipline relates to freedom, most of them will speak of discipline as an impediment to freedom. Discipline means doing what others want you to do. Discipline is an affront to spontaneity, intuition, improvisation, wild impulses, footloose pleasures. Now, discipline is acknowledged as a necessity in the lives of successful Grinnell undergraduates, who are expected to and do work very hard. But, discipline is not construed as an integral practice of freedom, even less of desire. Discipline makes a person more predictable and conventional and boring and, well, grown up, but it does not make you free.

I don’t usually argue with my students. Because, in general, I still find this first definition of freedom attractive. I think of it as an especially American view of freedom, and it suggests much of what I find appealing in young Americans: their capacity to

wake up each morning, freedom freshening within. It would be a grim pedagogy that hoped to squelch such optimism before life inevitably complicates it.

Moreover, my purpose in raising themes of freedom, desire and discipline with students is not to make them construe their lives differently, but to help them understand a different configuration of those themes, which recurs in the religious tradition that we study together. For, the second definition I derive from the ancient Christian tradition, from men and women who wrote much about freedom and desire, who experimented intensively with discipline. For these men and women, freedom and desire were complicated phenomena, especially in the context of a good human life. Perhaps this is understandable: They lived in the great slave societies of the late Roman Empire, at a time when poor populations were exposed to the droughts and violence that preceded the collapse of that world. In such a society, the privilege of people who had education and the leisure to write treatises and books must have set them at an infinite remove from the majority who laboured in order to survive. And because we only know well those people who did write treatises and books, our perspective on ancient Christianity is sharply biased. We only have insight into the hearts and minds of those people—overwhelmingly men— who were extremely privileged in their world—men who were free, socially and politically, but who experienced their freedom and their desire with anxiety. Not surprisingly, for their freedom was daily and demonstrably dependent on the exploitation of others. And desire, in this context, could not be trusted as a fair chooser of goods. Desire could lead one to excess, cruelty, greed, a lust for domination, the rage of frustrated power. Therefore, when ancient writers reflected on themes of desire, freedom and discipline, they often proposed a very different configuration than the one my students offer. For these ancients, freedom meant the power to *want* what is good.

After years of studying and teaching this material, I have begun to cherish the practical wisdom of this second definition. It has also occurred to me that one becomes more ready to appreciate it as one matures. And so let me elaborate on this other view of freedom as it emerges through the lives of two 4th century Christians theologians: Augustine of Hippo, the brilliant North African theologian, and Gregory of Nyssa, one of the great Cappadocians.

Now, Augustine you may recall from your own college days, since he is a fixture on the syllabus of Western classics. And since it is usually his Confessions that are read in the context of liberal arts, there is a good chance, depending on when you were a student, that you recall Augustine as a sexually neurotic, Catholic convert, with a gift for Latin rhetoric and an unresolved Oedipal complex. Despite my best efforts, I have a feeling that this is still how my students view him. When Augustine writes in despair about the “clouds of muddy carnal concupiscence” that “befogged” his youthful friendships, my students, who are not unfamiliar with lust, will look at me, baffled: what’s the problem?

Augustine, of course, had a number of problems, but for our purposes, let me propose a summary account: what arrested Augustine’s attention, as he wrote the Confessions in his early forties, was the problem of freedom and desire. Why, he wondered, should

desire—which seems so spontaneous, impulsive, autonomous—why should desire lead one so predictably into bondage? How does it happen that our wildest impulses march us straight to the most hackneyed scenarios? How does it happen that our libertine indulgences can turn into dull habits? When do our free choices become those obsessive repetitions that we know are fruitless, but cannot stop ourselves from making again?

When we are young, we feel confident that every day brings with it the original freedom of our capacity to choose. If we have squandered our talent or our love or our virtue today, tomorrow promises a fresh new start. The free chooser wakes up with just as much freedom tomorrow as yesterday...It is only later in life that we begin to realize that talent and love and virtue must be realized through the choices we make. And that we, as free choosers, have already been realized, taking shape and impress from those choices and the habits they support. It is only later, therefore, that we discover that a kind of inertia sets into our power to choose; we can always make choices, but we have a strong tendency to make the ones we have made before. And we can learn, sometimes with a deep sense of regret, that our power to choose now bends towards certain goods that are not particularly good at all. And we find that we are no longer free.

Augustine was one of many Christian theologians who have been stricken before the words of Paul's miserable confession in Romans: "the good that I love I do not, and the evil that I hate that I do". For Augustine, these words must have resonated around the major crisis of his life: whether to continue on the path of ambition through an advantageous marriage to a Milanese heiress or to dedicate himself to God and the philosophical life, which implied for him celibacy. If we see this crisis as a simple decision—whether to have sex or not to have sex--we will miss a great deal of its importance for Augustine. For the decision was more about how and whom to love, and therefore, how and who to become.

The decision was especially troubling for Augustine, because it bleakly revealed the inertia that crippled his power to choose. In his intellect, he had already chosen God, and yet he could not *realize* this choice; he could not cause himself to *desire* it. Why was this? He wondered. Augustine had thoroughly explored the career of an ambitious professor. He did not *like* the rowdy students, or the discomfort of teaching others to manipulate the truth in courts of law. As a kid from the provinces, he had been fascinated by centres of power and culture, by the prospect of wealthy and influential friends, but he knew now that his life in these centres made him feel sick and bereft. He had learned to look through the pomp and vanity and intellectual pretensions of great men. He was unquestionably happiest with that small circle of friends, who dreamed with him of living a communal life of study and conversation. And he acknowledged the spark of fidelity that had grown in the thirteen-year relationship he had enjoyed with the woman who was the mother of his son. He had become aware, therefore, that the things he valued most in life were not supported by the habit of ambition that had governed him to this point.

Yet a series of choices made long after he had gained this self-knowledge seemed to belie it all. To enable him to pursue a career in the style commensurate with his talent, his

mother negotiated an engagement for him to a very young and very wealthy Milanese girl. As a consequence, his partner was sent back to Africa, a virtual widow, leaving her only child with his father, as she would have been legally required to do. It is difficult to imagine this woman's pain—yet she told him that she would remain faithful to him all her life, and, knowing her, he believed that she would. The second choice concerned plans to establish a philosophical community with friends. And here it seems he made a choice more consistent with his conscious values, one that effectively ended his marital and professional ambitions. He retreated with friends to a private estate to form a philosophical community, in which both his son and his mother participated. It was in this context that he confronted the final choice that had to be made, whether to dedicate his life to that One on whom all his intellectual and spiritual energies were now focussed—that Great Beauty, so Old and so New, he would later write, which is God.

Yet he deferred the decision, on intellectual grounds, on philosophical grounds, on exegetical grounds, until he finally ran out of ground. And found himself on the edge of a precipice, convinced in every way that he needed to be, but unable to take the next step. His inertia before this choice exacerbated his sense that other life choices had not been freely made either. He had dismissed the woman he loved because his fiancée's family demanded it, and then quietly taken another lover to salve the wound of grief that now made him, as he reports, frigid but desperate. While it was a fact that he had retreated from his professional ambitions, the deeper truth was that a chronic illness had intervened and decided the issue for him. The proximate cause of his resignation from teaching seems to have been some form of asthma, which made his continued professional life impossible. So when he faced the decision to choose God, he was aware that his freedom of choice had never been as free as he imagined it. He had been moved by compulsions of pride, ambition, grief, anger, lust; and the momentum of these had created an impressive illusion of free choices deliberately made. But now that he wanted to turn from the path on which these compulsions had launched him, he found that he could not. It was not that he remained secretly unconvinced of his need to turn to God; for he believed profoundly that nothing could make him more well or happy or fruitful in life. And yet he could not mobilize his desire for the one good that he was deeply convinced he should want. Augustine wrote: "I sighed after such freedom, but was bound not by an iron imposed by anyone else, but by the iron of my own choice... I was responsible for the fact that habit had become so embattled against me; for it was with my consent that I came to the place in which I did not wish to be."(Book VIII(10))

Augustine did convert, in a scene of anguish and then relief. He always believed, however, that it was only through God's grace that he received the freedom he needed to move on from his paralysis of will: freedom that gave him the power to love and desire that which he valued above all. Later, Augustine would become the strongest author and advocate of the Catholic doctrine of original sin—by which he meant to emphasize that freedom of choice is vacuous without the freedom to love what is good. It was this latter freedom, he believed, that humans lost in the fall, which must be restored through the grace of God. And it was this freedom of desire, Augustine taught, that must be practiced through discipline.

While Augustine exemplifies the crisis of freedom in an intimate context, Gregory of Nyssa enables us to approach the problem in a public scene. So let me turn for a little to him.

Gregory was a generation older than Augustine. They did not know each other: Gregory spoke and wrote in Greek, Augustine spoke and wrote in Latin. Further, their temperaments were so different that one doubts whether they would have liked each other. Augustine's attentions were dominated by the human world, the demands of intense friendships, the responsibilities of ministering to a parish in which Christians of various quality and commitment would mix. Augustine was attracted to his surroundings more by curiosity than sensuality. Gregory, on the other hand, would have preferred to spend his days living quietly on one of his family's estates: he loved the beauty of the countryside; even in exile, he could write about "pears as white as newly polished ivory", "immense heaps of peaches" or the course of a river "that gleam[ed] like a ribbon of gold through a deep purple robe." One commentator notes that Gregory was never happier than when he was living in hiding.

Augustine's passions were dominated by concupiscence; the tragedy of human life, in his view, was lawless appetite. While Augustine fulminated over the unruliness of sexual desire, its unpredictability and passion, Gregory's treatise on virginity says almost nothing about lust. Instead, Gregory reflects long on the inchoate sorrows that attend marriage and parenthood. For Gregory, the tragedy of human life was its helpless exposure to death, and the anxiety of desire that caused. The danger of marriage, in his view, was not that spouses would expose one another to sexual desire, but that they would expose one another to mourning—for the deepest loves between husband and wife, the devastating loves of parents for children, could lead to inconsolable pain. For Augustine, celibacy was a practice of concentrated desire; for Gregory, virginity was a defence against grief.

Augustine was brilliant, confident, ardent; the most intransigent lust he found in himself was the desire to be praised among men. Gregory was a hapless political animal; his abiding fault was an easily bruised sense of dignity. Yet late in life, when Gregory wrote about the soul's desire for God, no theologian was more radiant.

Gregory spent most of his life overshadowed by his famous brother Basil of Caesarea and his equally famous sister, the brilliant Macrina. These two were among those ancient Christians who reflected intensively on the nexus of discipline, freedom and desire. Basil is considered the founder of Christian monasticism in the East, and Macrina actually preceded him in this endeavour. Macrina was the eldest of nine children born to a very wealthy family, which had been Christian for at least three generations. Upon her father's death, Macrina convinced her mother to turn the family estates into proto-monastic communities, where all possessions would be held in common and family members would live as equals with slaves. Macrina was no wild-eyed visionary; she continued to manage the properties with such expertise that they became centres of food distribution to the poor during times of famine. Her convent was a sort of refuge for abandoned baby girls and young widows. All of this was achieved in the context of a

communal life organized around regular periods of prayer, liturgy, fasting and feasting. Gregory deeply admired his sister, and we know about her primarily because of a treatise he wrote. She also figures in his treatise *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, in which she stars as the philosophical teacher who soothes her brother's soul.

Yet Basil would go on to eclipse every other member of this illustrious family when he was appointed bishop of Caesarea. Basil's appointment was opposed by the Emperor Valens, an Arian advocate, so the new bishop wanted supporters around him in neighbouring sees. In Basil's wake, then, Gregory was swept into public life..

Gregory had reflected often on freedom and the power to choose what one wants. He was immensely rich, well educated, but he had spent much of his life doing what his elder siblings wanted. Thus, he might be forgiven for thinking that here was his chance to exercise a little power of his own: he was going to be a bishop.

When we are young, many of us entertain fantasies about the kind of freedom that people with power and authority have. If anyone has the power to choose to do or be or have whatever they want, surely it is those who have power over us. When we are children, we imagine our parents making decisions for our lives with serene omniscience; of course, as teen-agers, we see them for the witless tyrants they are. When we are students, we imagine professors deciding our grades and our futures with calm deliberation, even if we think they don't understand us; when we are faculty we imagine deans and college presidents as monarchs of all they survey. And this fantasy carries over into other professional pursuits, we behold the omnipotent senior partners, the inner sanctum of vice-presidents, chiefs of staff, even bishops. We may submit or rebel against these omnipotents, depending on our temperament.

But it is usually only later, when we actually get to exercise some authority as parents or teachers, as vice-presidents or chief of staff, even as college administrators, that we learn the hard truth. The freedom gained through authority rarely feels like the strong power we fantasized it would be. It often feels more like responsibility for risks that must be taken, for outcomes that cannot be foreseen; it feels more like vulnerability before cantankerous and unruly constituencies who neither appreciate nor especially respect the responsibility one bears. Freedom as the power to choose turns out to be an anxious kind of freedom when one must make decisions on which many people depend. As such, it is a freedom that may make one feel more like a servant of various masters, a target of blame for public failures.

Gregory was conscripted by Basil to maintain a friendly presence in the backwater region of Nyssa. He was immediately disappointed. He saw himself as having been banished to the back of beyond, and his protests were met with Basil's rueful observation that he did not expect Gregory to obtain distinction from his see, but that he might try to confer some distinction upon it. Without any special aptitude, Gregory's exercise of power involved frequent humiliation. Basil would publicly claim that Gregory was "quite inexperienced"; even Macrina, on her deathbed, reminded him that "he had little or no native capacity" for ecclesiastical politics. He did stupid things. When he could not mediate a conflict

between Basil and their uncle, another bishop, Gregory forged letters from the two men that made each think the other sought reconciliation. When the ruse was found out, Basil was furious. Gregory was eventually charged with embezzlement of church funds, and sent into exile by Emperor Valens. Gregory's devout biographers like to point out that he was a saint, and that the Emperor was a heretic. But one still suspects, in Gregory's case, that he may have been trying to accomplish some scheme he couldn't otherwise find a way to do.

Gregory strongly felt his impotence as a bishop. The freedom to exercise power as he chose to do seemed always just beyond his grasp: when he read about Paul's experience of flesh warring against spirit, Gregory thought Paul must have meant the frustrated anger that so often shook the bishop against his will. One of the last images we have of him is typical. The elderly Gregory had come to visit another bishop, and was left at the gate, sitting in the blazing sun, while a crowd gathered to gape at him. When the other bishop finally received him in stony silence, he refused to hear Gregory's petition, and then ostentatiously failed to invite Gregory to the feast that was being prepared in their presence. Gregory knew that one could have a great deal of wealth and privilege and authority and yet still feel helpless. The freedom to choose whatever goods he wanted eluded him, and worse, the expectation that he should have that kind of power created storms of frustration, indignation, shame. It also tempted him to bend the rules a little in order to try to get something done, which invariably led to deeper humiliations.

For Gregory, as for Augustine, it became apparent that freedom as the power to choose typically led to feelings of impotence and inertia. The freedom one needed was a deeper matter: the power to *want* what is good. It was only this freedom that could make one truly powerful, and only this freedom that could guide one's choices in wise and constructive ways.

When he wrote about the freedom of the will, Gregory used a striking metaphor. Our power of choice is like a mirror inside us. Whatever we choose appears in us as an image of its object. Eventually, what we are inside is a composite of images of the goods we have chosen. This metaphor had a special resonance for Gregory because he believed that at the deepest level, we are made in the image of God. And he believed that this image remains in us, covered over with the myriad objects of choice that we have chosen instead of God. But it is still open to us to choose the love of God, and when we do, he believed, that primordial image shines through as it did in the beginning. What was needed was grace to strengthen desire, to create that synergy of love and will that would restore humanity to its original beauty.

Towards the end of his life, Gregory wrote his most famous treatises, which are usually called his mystical theology. He wrote about the desire for God, and the freedom of a soul caught up in that desire, always moving toward its love. He imagined that freedom as flight, as the power of a soul winging forever into the luminous darkness of the Beloved. Such desire was not only the most vivid expression of freedom; it was also for Gregory the ultimate vision of the good. Never to achieve satiety of desiring, he wrote, is truly to see God.

For Augustine, for Gregory, freedom was not a power of choice over multiple goods; it was a power of desiring the one good that would make you truly happy and truly free. Such freedom, both Augustine and Gregory believed, comes from grace; but grace, they knew well, takes practice. For them, discipline was not a restriction on freedom or desire; discipline was a practice *of* desire integral to freedom. Discipline was a kind of trellis on which desire could be trained to grow towards one's centre of value, towards what is good.

Perhaps we might think of it like this. When we witness a musician perform, what we perceive is the grace, the speed, the responsiveness. We do not necessarily see work at all, we rarely perceive choice because the performer is not deciding to do this thing and then that. The choices have already been made. The technical, intellectual and aesthetic values have been incorporated by the musician through hours and days of study, exercises and practice. So that once the performance begins, one might say that the performer is being performed by a freedom that has become so habitual, so integral to him or her that it has disappeared into the body. Discipline, in this case, is the *incorporation* of freedom.

Why should we imagine that the freedom to want what is good requires no practice at all? That the capacity to choose among goods will be enough to see us through a happy and virtuous life? We know immediately that the capacity to choose among goods would enable no more than the first step of our becoming an accomplished musician. Freedom is a power that must be elicited, strengthened, trained in subtle gestures, until, like the values incorporated in the musician's hands, it disappears from conscious choice. And then the performance, becomes, not a series of free choices to strike this note and then that one, but a play of intricate gesture that expresses the freedom of one whose desire has become transparent to the good-- freedom in which the power to choose has disappeared into love.

A few years ago, I came upon an essay by the late English philosopher, Iris Murdoch, that includes these lines: "We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy. Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons..."(Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch")

I often think of these lines when I consider familiar lives benighted by desires that draw us away from the good that we love, the good that we would choose but do not. We are not free choosers; it is a sobering thought, one that I still plant delicately near undergraduates.

But you, who have lived longer in the deep texture of reality, and are less disposed now to fantasy or dream-like facilities, have discovered already the complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons. And so you may feel a resonance with men and women who lived long ago, pondering complications of freedom and desire, seeking the practical wisdom of disciplines that would sustain gracious and powerful lives.